

introduction

Obesity, a serious condition in which weight gain has reached the point of endangering health, can contribute to the onset of disease and premature mortality. Obesity is a leading cause of preventable death in the United States.¹

How Are Overweight and Obesity Defined?

Obesity and overweight are commonly defined in terms of the body mass index (BMI). BMI is calculated using a person's height and weight. In adults, a BMI of 18.5 to 24.9 is considered to be ideal, and anything above this is defined as overweight. A BMI greater than or equal to 30 is defined as obese. (See Appendix A.)

While the terms “obesity” and “overweight” refer to adults, the terms “overweight” and “at risk of becoming overweight” refer to children. For children between the ages of 2 to 20 years old, overweight is defined as at or above the gender- and age-specific 95th percentile of BMI, based on the revised Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Growth Charts for the US. “At risk of becoming overweight” is defined as greater than or equal to the 85th percentile, but less than the 95th percentile for BMI by age and sex based on the same growth charts. (See Appendix A.)

How Overweight Are We?

Overweight and obesity have reached nationwide epidemic proportions. The most recent data (2004 BRFSS) show that 60.1 percent of American adults are

overweight or obese and 23.4 percent are obese.^{1,2} This means that the percentage of obese adults has more than doubled over the last 14 years (11.5 percent in 1990; 23.4 percent in 2004). Since this epidemic shows no signs of declining, it can be considered the public health issue of the 21st century. For this reason, both the prevention and treatment of overweight and obesity, along with associated health problems, are important public health goals.

In Utah, a similar increase in the percentage of overweight and obese adults has occurred over time. The most recent data (2004 BRFSS) show that 58.4 percent of Utah adults are overweight or obese and 21.0 percent are obese.² This represents a 112 percent increase in the number of obese adults over the last 14 years (9.9 percent 1990; 21.0 percent in 2004).

The obesity issue is not limited to adults. In 2003, 12.1 percent of American high school students were overweight and 14.8 percent were at risk of becoming overweight. The comparable 2003 Utah data show that 7.0 percent of Utah high school students were overweight and 11.3 percent were at risk of becoming overweight.³

What Causes Overweight?

Overweight and obesity are caused by many factors. Body weight is influenced by a combination of genetic, metabolic, behavioral, environmental, cultural, and socioeconomic influences. Overweight

and obesity result from excess calorie consumption and/or inadequate physical activity.

What Is The Impact of Overweight?

A recent study showed that obesity was associated with 111,909 excess deaths (and overweight was not associated with excess mortality).⁴ Adults who are overweight or obese are at increased risk for morbidity from arthritis, diabetes, hypertension, high cholesterol, coronary heart disease, sleep apnea, respiratory problems, and endometrial, breast, prostate, and colon cancers.⁵

Unlike many chronic diseases and their related risk factors, which disproportionately affect the poor and uneducated, obesity spans all income and education levels, as well as racial and ethnic groups. More than half of Utah's population is now either overweight or obese, or about 919,700 of the state's adults. The prevalence of overweight and obesity in Utah steadily increases until age 65, and more Utah men than women are overweight or obese; a trend observed in all age groups.²

In addition to an increase in onset of disease and premature mortality, obesity has serious financial consequences for both the individual and the American economy. This burden manifests itself in

premature death and disability, increased health care costs, and lost productivity. The burden is not trivial. According to a study of national costs attributed to both overweight and obesity, related medical expenses accounted for 9.1 percent of total US medical expenditures in 1998, and may have reached as high as \$78.5 billion (\$92.6 billion in 2002 dollars). The estimated total cost of adult obesity-attributable expenditures in Utah is estimated to be \$393 million in 1998-2000.⁶

The importance of addressing overweight and obesity is evident when reviewing the Healthy People 2010 document.⁷ Healthy People 2010 is a statement of national objectives designed to identify the most significant preventable risks to health and to establish national goals to reduce these risks. The Healthy People 2010 objectives were created by a broad collaborative effort that included scientific expertise from the government, academia, and the private sector. There are 10 leading health indicators, with physical activity and overweight/obesity being the first and second. These relate to two focus areas (nutrition and overweight, and physical activity and fitness) which include 33 specific national objectives combined. (See Appendix B for a list of the objectives relevant to this report.)